



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Geoffrey Hill and intrinsic value

Citation for published version:

Spinks, L 2018, 'Geoffrey Hill and intrinsic value', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 68, no. 3, cgy015, pp. 369-389.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgy015>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1093/escrit/cgy015](https://doi.org/10.1093/escrit/cgy015)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Essays in Criticism

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in 'Essays in Criticism' following peer review. The version of record Lee Spinks; Geoffrey Hill and Intrinsic Value, Essays in Criticism, Volume 68, Issue 3, 1 July 2018, Pages 369–389, is available online at:
<https://academic.oup.com/eic/article/68/3/369/5050218?searchresult=1>.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Geoffrey Hill and Intrinsic Value

What might it mean to think that there is an intrinsic value to the language that we use? The question of intrinsic value has been a continuing preoccupation of the contemporary English poet-critic Geoffrey Hill. Considering the issue in a 1999 *Paris Review* interview Hill remarked, 'I'm currently trying to write a number of essays on value. Simply to ask whether there is such a thing, whether you can actually isolate, define in some way, the nature of intrinsic value. And that involves going back into a vast hinterland.' Hill's reflections on what he variously calls here 'value' and 'intrinsic value' subsequently formed the basis of his Tanner Lectures 'Poetry and Value' and 'Intrinsic Value: Marginal Observations on a Central Question' delivered at Oxford University in March 2000. In this essay I want to follow certain aspects of Hill's thinking about intrinsic value both as a subject of interest in themselves and in terms of the light they might shed upon emerging tendencies of his own poetry which receive perhaps their most striking expression in the distinctively new, and radically dissonant, poetic style bodied forth in volumes like *The Triumph of Love* (1998) and *Speech! Speech!* (2000) that appeared in the same period he was preparing his Tanner Lectures. My pursuit of the first question will trace the influence upon his thinking of poetry and value of three exemplary figures, each of whom has proved an important presence in his own critical writing: John Ruskin, George Eliot, and, to a persisting and perhaps predominating degree, the seventeenth-century political philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

Let me begin to explore what may be at stake in Hill's thinking of intrinsic value by turning to stanza LXX of his book-length sequence *The Triumph of Love*, a poem which combines a rebarbative, sometimes rancorous, poetic autobiography with a sustained lament for the despoiled state of the English (and more broadly European) moral and civic imagination:

Active Virtue: that which shall contain
 its own passion in the public weal –
 do you follow? – or can you at least
 take the drift of the thing? The struggle
 for a noble vernacular: this
 did not end with Petrarch. But where is it?
 Where has it go us? Does it stop, in our case,
 with Dryden, or perhaps,
 Milton's political sonnets? – the cherished stock
 hacked into ransom and ruin; the voices
 of distinction, far back, indistinct?
 Still, I'm convinced that shaping,
 voicing, are types of civic action. Or, slightly
 to refashion this, that Wordsworth's two
 Prefaces stand with his great tract
 on the Convention of Cintra, witnessing
 to the praesidium in the sacred name
 of things betrayed. *Intrinsic value*
 I am somewhat less sure of. It seems
 implicate with active virtue but I cannot
 say how, precisely. Partaking of both
 fact and recognition, it must be, therefore,

in effect, at once agent and predicate:

imponderables brought home

to the brute mass and detail of the world;

there, by some, to be pondered.¹

Several things are striking about this passage. There is, to begin, the commitment to an idea of 'active virtue' which both 'contains its own passion in the public weal' and remains tied to a particular type of speech or utterance ideally encapsulated, it appears, by a 'noble vernacular' subsequently silenced by over three hundred years of clamorous modernity. The connection implied here between active virtue and a way of writing and speaking is quickly reinforced by an assertion much approved by Hill's more sympathetic critics ('Still, I'm convinced that shaping, voicing, are types of civic action'), although it's worth remarking that the relationship between shaping, voicing and types of civic action is both enigmatically and tentatively given ('Or, slightly to refashion this') and conservatively rendered as elegiac tribute to the lost glory of 'things betrayed.' The same hesitancy resurfaces in Hill's handling of the notion of 'intrinsic value' which appears to have a necessary relationship to active virtue, even if this relationship remains provokingly and troublesomely vague: provoking in the sense that an essential element of the intrinsically valuable must apparently be established for active virtue to oppose, and possibly redeem, whatever in the 'brute mass and detail of the world' threatens continually to obscure it; troublesome insofar as the singular quality which goes by the name of the intrinsic appears irreducibly double, at once agent and predicate, effect and embodiment, of the medium through which judgements about the world are made. A number of these inflections or

¹ Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love* (London: Penguin 1998) pp 36-37.

emphases - the link posited here between active virtue and a particular kind of speech, the implied connection between such speech and potentially restorative or redemptive forms of civic action, the simultaneously central and enigmatically conceived nature of elegy, Hill's curious insistence upon what he calls here 'the drift of the thing' in language, the seemingly paradoxical or counter-intuitive perception of intrinsic value as somehow intrinsically *double* - recur throughout Hill's imaginative and critical writing, constituting, as we will see, the kernel of all his thinking on the idea of the intrinsic in value.

A recurring touchstone for Hill's reflections on intrinsic value is the work of John Ruskin. What initially drew Hill to Ruskin was the latter's unwavering determination to detach and preserve thinking about value from the power of commodity. Behind this attraction may be traced Hill's abiding concern with, and resistance to, the use of what we might somewhat paradoxically call 'intrinsic currency value' to shape ideas of ethical and aesthetic value. To the extent Hill shares Ruskin's conviction that the problem of the nature of values is continually exacerbated by the elision of monetary values with human values - a problem which finds a proper response in the refusal to speak of 'values' in a general way, to return as far as possible in everything we think and do to the root of value in the specific and singular instance, to deny, at crucial points, any simple continuity between values in different spheres of human activity - he locates himself deliberately within a Ruskinian tradition. At the same time, however, Hill's hypersensitivity to a constitutive ambivalence in Ruskin's development of the notion of intrinsic value reveals a fundamental tension between their respective styles of thinking which has, I want to suggest, important implications for his own writing. By the term 'ambivalence' I mean to suggest the way Ruskin's desire to preserve the intrinsically valuable from contamination by the sphere of the monetary to which it nevertheless appears to stand in some necessary relation leads him

to cancel or arrest a vital element in force *within* the intrinsic itself. As Hill phrases the matter:

Until recently I was essentially an adherent of 'intrinsic value' as delineated by Ruskin. I am now less sure of my position, partly because I am no longer confident that I can discern the point at which Ruskin himself crosses an indeterminate line between, on the one hand, regarding money as an 'expression of right', or entitlement, or as a sign of relations, and, on the other hand, using a monetary trope in which 'intrinsic value' is by sleight of will substituted as the vital referent. In the first instance, Ruskin concedes that, if received as a 'sign', money is '*Always, and necessarily . . . imperfect . . . but, capable of approximate accuracy if rightly ordered*'; in the second instance, the 'expression of right' itself takes on a mysteriously intransitive quality that is thereafter to be received – and not questioned – by us as 'intrinsic value'. Any notion of 'approximate accuracy' is dissolved and Ruskin's real authority of eloquence is devoted, as here in *Munera Pulveris*, to the creation and promulgation of an idea of the intrinsic that is scarcely to be distinguished from the intransitive:

It does not in the least affect the intrinsic value of the wheat, the air, or the flowers, that men refuse or despise them. Used or not, their own power is in them, and that particular power is in nothing else.²

² Geoffrey Hill, "Poetry and Value," in *Collected Critical Writings*, Kenneth Haynes (ed), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp 485-86.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this passage is the principled distance Hill assumes from the commonplace conception of the intrinsic as an interior or immanent quality of the thing described. His objection to Ruskin's formulation is formed in opposition to the process by which the intrinsic becomes simultaneously the subject and ground of value so that the value *of* the flowers is somehow *in* the flowers, safely sequestered in their irreducible inviolability from the contaminating outside of translation and exchange. What is lost from this perception is everything which, to Hill's mind, animated Ruskin's most intense and supple insights into the nature of value, where value is grasped as momentary purchase upon the particular quality of a thing as it becomes part of the mind's activity in its passage from apprehension to recognition in all the various implications of that term. Crucially for my purposes, Hill reinforces this point by linking Ruskin's misrecognition of the proper nature of intrinsic value to a particular, limited, and self-constrained form of *elegy* too narrowly tuned to the eloquence of mourning. Elegy conceived in this fashion, he argues, too abruptly forecloses upon a vital quality of intrinsic force: thus what he calls the 'elegiac celebration of 'intrinsic value'' which understands the value of something as 'being in some sense isolated from current degradation, and therefore as being inviolate, held securely within the sphere of the intransitive' (it does not in the least affect the intrinsic value of the wheat, the air, or the flowers, Ruskin insists, that men neglect or despise them) too easily effaces the creative and co-constituting labour of physical and imaginative cultivation which releases whatever may be at stake in the intrinsic by expanding it beyond its previous limits. Conversely, Hill declares, in one of his key critical assertions, 'our grasp of intrinsic value is *transitive* in its implications.' What is intrinsic to value, he means to suggest by this lapidary formulation, can never be preserved in itself or wholly separated from that power of reflective integration by which we make judgements about objects of conscious perception. Instead Hill's own work looks always to inscribe the *extrinsic* quality

of value at the heart of the intrinsic by continually relocating it within the transitive and compacted work of contingent reflection.³

Hill's extended and intricate reflection on the nature of intrinsic value which, while never abjuring elegy, looks to recover within it a renewing and radically transitive power of self-reflection, offers a way of approaching a curiously vertiginous quality of his own writing which conserves, while seeming also to dissemble, an extraordinary concentration of elegiac force. Here, by way of example, is verset XXV of *Mercian Hymns*, a poem which explicitly acknowledges Ruskin's persisting influence upon Hill's thinking:

Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*,
I speaks this in memory of my grandmother, whose
childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
nailer's darg.

The nailshop stood back of the cottage, by the fold.
It reeked stale mineral sweat. Sparks had furred
its low roof. In dawn-light the troughed water
floated a damson-bloom of dust –

not to be shaken by posthumous clamour. It is one
thing to celebrate the 'quick forge', another
to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire.

³ Ibid, p. 487; my emphasis.

Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*,
 I speaks this in memory of my grandmother, whose
 childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
 nailer's darg.⁴

This is, in its unobtrusive way, an exceptional moment in *Mercian Hymns*, one of the few points in the sequence where Hill unambiguously detaches his voice from the superimposed personae of King Offa or the Muse of History to offer a brief spartan elegy for his own grandmother, and, by implication, all the countless others whose anonymous suffering is too easily effaced by the levelling gaze of historical retrospection. The poem is, in this regard, emblematic of a persistent ethical strain in Hill's writing which strives to locate and cultivate intrinsically valuable elements of historical experience beyond their ideological circumscription by the self-justifying manoeuvres of political *negotium*. Hill's poem provides an exemplary instance of such ethical reflection and resistance in its use of the quoted phrase 'quick forge,' which, momentarily invoking the Chorus of *Henry V* ('But now behold / in the quick forge and working-house of thought'), captures the moment of ideological conversion by which the history of labour, suffering and dispossession concealed within the vernacular is conscripted and reconfigured by the vibrant discourse of English nationalism (5. 0. 23). By positioning 'quick forge' immediately before the desolating image of a face 'hare-lipped by the searing wire' the counterpointed halves of Hill's sentence weave the borrowed phrase tightly into the poem's ethical structure so that the material residue of past pain glimmers fitfully within the terms of its rhetorical sublimation where 'to forge' is to imagine *and* to labour, to transcend the limits of the workaday commonplace ('to

⁴ Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, Kenneth Haynes (ed), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 107.

forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race,' as Stephen Dedalus hubristically phrased it) while remaining in intractable relation to the inescapable realities of material deprivation.⁵ Fastidiously restraining their own impulsion towards the eloquence of memorialisation ('In dawn-light the troughed water floated a damson-bloom of dust'), Hill's lines enact their own ethics in their insistence that the memory of historical destitution must not be effaced or wished out of existence by the 'posthumous clamour' of lyric attitudinizing, sentimental mystification, fake piety or the marmoreal glaze of commemorative remembrance. But at precisely this point a problem arises insofar as the poem's ethical propriety – its principled refusal to permit the material trace of the past to be drowned out by the 'posthumous clamour' of elegiac celebration – necessarily requires a detour through the impropriety of exactly the *same* clamour, for what is Hill's poem *but* posthumous clamour, the untimely and belated recovery of an irretrievable suffering? What is remarkable about the poem, to my mind at least, is the way whatever is intrinsically valuable to it simultaneously comes into being in its self-subduing abnegation of its own contingent force and its posthumous assertion of everything it everywhere elsewhere refuses, in order that it might transform its historical scene in the act of leaving the past unshaken while leaving unshaken everything Hill's art solicitously transforms. Faithful to the same contradictory impulse, the poem's recursive opening and closing stanzas retrospectively assume and abjure the role of parentheses or quotation marks, encompassing a text which seems stubbornly to resist quotation, while enclosing a script which continually exceeds their bounds.

⁵ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Jeri Johnson (ed), (1916; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 213.

Hill's tensely reflexive apposition of intrinsic value and elegy acquires further resonance when considered in the light of another preponderant strain of his thinking: his continuing engagement with English political writing of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The shadow of the English Civil War looms large over Hill's poetry; it is not too much to say that Hill conceives poetry generally as a kind of civil war about the nature of the civic as it becomes possible for us in the shadow of contested and contestable speech. He underscores his own sense of the enduring importance of seventeenth-century political thought to contemporary reflection upon the nature of ethical polity in his arresting claim that rightly to evaluate early responses to Hobbes (such as those of John Bramhall and the Earl of Clarendon) 'will be to recognize ourselves as barely having moved from under the shadow of their contentions.'⁶ Hobbes is a crucial and problematic figure in Hill's work insofar as he exposes a tension at the heart of Hill's thinking about intrinsic value, particularly as it bears upon questions of language in its relation to our private and public selves; it is almost as if Hill is drawn to Hobbes against his will when one part of his imagination would rather leave him well alone. To grasp what might be at stake in Hill's recurring engagement with Hobbes we need to see that for him *Leviathan* should be read, whatever else it may be, as a tragic elegy on the extinction of intrinsic value which turns upon a kind of internal paradox or movement of internal self-subversion that ultimately brings Hobbes's real perception of value into view. Thus part of Hobbes despair in *Leviathan*, Hill notes, arises from the death of the young Royalist Sidney Godolphin who, "hating no man, nor hated of any", Hobbes elegises, 'was unfortunately slain in the beginning of the late Civill warre, in the Publique quarrell, by an undiscerned, and an undiscerning hand.'⁷ Yet if this is true, if Godolphin's death does extirpate intrinsic value from the world, what, Hill ponders, are we to make of

⁶ Geoffrey Hill, "The Eloquence of Sober Truth," *Collected Critical Writings* p. 328.

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, C. B. Macpherson (ed.), (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984) p. 718.

Hobbes's own elegy for Godolphin which hereby reconsecrates the idea of the intrinsically valuable in the very act of renouncing it, suspending us, as it were, between disavowal and declaration?

From the very beginning, Hill notes, the 'problem' Hobbes presented to some of his contemporaries appeared not only in his authoritarian politics of sovereign power (a view that a number of his antagonists enthusiastically shared) but also in his exposure of a kind of radical equivocacy or semantic doubleness at the heart of representation itself which *enables*, even as it seems to *threaten*, the possibility of intrinsic value and an inherently virtuous commonwealth. Thus while ostensible opposition to Hobbes on the part of contemporaries like the first Earl of Clarendon and Bishop Bramhall emerged as resistance to the tonal savagery of his repudiation of the politic commonplace, all too necessary in a time of civil schism, by which contending parties tacitly agreed to express themselves 'with a marked courtesy towards the quality of reciprocal discourse, or, at least, towards a fiction of the desired reciprocity,' *real* opposition to Hobbes arose rather from the perceived damage done to moral virtue and civic values by his cultivation of a power of exorbitance and self-subversion within the primary sense of words.⁸ Despite Hobbes's concerted emphasis upon the moral, as well as political, value of plain speech, instinct in his menacing rejoinder to an interlocutor that 'if he would not have his words so be understood, he should not have let them runne,' his writing is continually marked by a hypersensitivity to linguistic dexterity and the contingent circumstance of language which puts the very possibility of plain sense into question.⁹ Hobbes's leaps of imaginative power, Hill reminds us, arise in part because he is a 'master of nuance and innuendo, tactics absolutely requiring that our language

⁸ Geoffrey Hill, "The Eloquence of Sober Truth," p. 329.

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 194.

retains, and is directed so as to retain, a good deal of partly consumed matter, the stuff of contrary feelings and perplexed experience, even a certain amount of bad odour.¹⁰ Such tactics also necessarily require, of course, a figure or mechanism capable of resolving perplexity into sense; Hobbes's uncompromising model of sovereign authority is therefore always also a response to a linguistic, as well as political, state of nature.¹¹ To his antagonists Hobbes is the epitome of the merely logomachic or 'dexterous' opportunist whose dexterity combines suppleness of judgement with an unprincipled willingness to deceive. What takes Hill's attention, however, is the way that the defence of linguistic and moral virtue proffered by Hobbes's opponents requires precisely the same licence of dexterity they everywhere denounce. These opponents angrily repudiate Hobbes's contemptuous dismissal of the teaching of the medieval schoolmen whose speculations at least afford, in Clarendon's words, 'terms of art . . . which in truth are a cipher to which all men of moderate learning have the key'; without this cipher, how, exactly, are statements to be read, or *meant* to be read, in order that they might constitute the basis of politic concord, ethics of reciprocity and civic consensus?¹² Contrary to what they saw as Hobbes's imperious style of averment, which sought to resolve problems of sense either by linguistic

¹⁰ Geoffrey Hill, "The Eloquence of Sober Truth," p. 335.

¹¹ A crucial function of sovereign rule, as Philip Pettit has illuminatingly demonstrated, is to constitute and regulate a new order of common meanings. In its constitutive role the sovereign 'saves ratiocination from the problems deriving from the indexical, perspective-relative character of words like *good* and *bad*, and *mine* and *yours*' by establishing "an order of public meanings in an area where such an order is not spontaneously available, restoring the power of words to provide people with common bearings and shared reasons.' Having thus utilized its power to establish constitutive rules that determine the common meaning of words and form a basis for shared conceptions of value, the sovereign then uses the law to establish 'regulative rules that impose sanctions on the breach of private contracts, making it possible for subjects to give their words to one another and make them stick.' Philip Pettit, *Made with Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) 132, 152.

¹² Edward Hyde, *A Brief View and Survey of the Dangerous and Pernicious errors to Crown and state in Mr Hobbes's Leviathan* (1674); qtd in Geoffrey Hill, "The Eloquence of Sober Truth," p. 334.

dogmatism or ceding arbitrary and absolute authority over definition to the Sovereign and the sovereign decision, Clarendon and Bramhall, Hill reminds us, looked instead to discover the intrinsic meaning and value of things in that force of the commonplace embodied by popular custom, common report, and tried and tested human wisdom. Intrinsic value for them principally reveals itself in styles and habits of reflexion derived from, and exemplified by, what Clarendon calls 'a proper and devout custom of speaking' arising from the established authority of Anglican tradition and 'that common practice of circumspection and providence, which custom and discretion hath introduced into human life.'¹³ Yet notwithstanding the affective power of Clarendon's elegiac appeal to the abiding value of those qualities intrinsic to civic and linguistic custom and propriety, Hill takes a dry relish in demonstrating that such 'propriety' has a 'double root' in notions of inalienable rights of property and established social hierarchy which are 'wholly untroubled by his contempt for dirty people of no name, the illiterate and dispossessed.'¹⁴

A point which should also be stressed here is that Hill's fascination with Hobbes's hypersensitivity to the dangerous equivocality of words exposes a crucial fault-line in his own response to the question of language and intrinsic value. This fault-line reveals itself in two related observations Hill makes in 'Poetry and Value': first, that in developing his own 'autodidactic inquiry into the nature of intrinsic value' he remains attached to 'a form of belief in original sin, one that is probably not too far removed from orthodox'; and, secondly, that his 'strong attachment to Newman's 'terrible aboriginal calamity' makes particularly difficult his attempts 'to give some kind of priority to the status of intrinsic

¹³ Ibid, p, 37; qtd in Geoffrey Hill, "The Eloquence of Sober Truth," p. 339.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Hill, "The Eloquence of Sober Truth," p. 339.

value as an ethical referent.’¹⁵ In order to grasp the enduring implications of this rather equivocating passage we need, I think, to understand the subject of ‘priority’ here in a necessarily double sense. By returning us, even in the memory of its loss, to a state of pure prelapsarian presence prior to any perception of equivocation or dissemblance, the thought of original sin inevitably complicates any attempt to give *priority* to intrinsic value as an ethical referent; ethics, after all, is in theological terms a *secondary* and *supplementary* effect of the fall of man which engenders an irreducible semantic dubiety at the heart of the relationship between word and world.¹⁶ Yet at the same time, *any* conception of ‘value’ we may hold, intrinsic, spiritual or otherwise, only becomes possible *in the first place* as a consequence of that loss of primordial unity which accompanies our fall into language, mutability and death.

The recognition to which the notion of original sin recalls us that we can only conceive what is ‘original’ or ‘intrinsic’ to value *extrinsically*, as it were, by means of a detour through language and mutability helps clarify Hobbes’s centrality to Hill’s thinking in this area. This influence is clearly evident in Hill’s remark that ‘Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, presents us with an

¹⁵ Geoffrey Hill, “Poetry and Value,” p

¹⁶ Kevin Hart has convincingly shown that the hermeneutic model of interpretation – indeed the very possibility of interpretation in general – can be read as an allegory of Adam’s Fall. As he observes, ‘The Fall from innocence to experience not only divides the world but also introduces a definite structure of value: we fall from an undifferentiated knowledge of good to a differentiated and fatal knowledge of good and evil. From God’s presence we pass to his absence; from immediacy to mediation; from the perfect congruence of sign and referent to the gap between word and object; from fullness of being to a lack of being; from ease and play to strain and labour; from purity to impurity; and from life to death. . . . Language, too, has fallen - from the proper to the figural – with the consequence that intention and interpretation will often fail to connect.” Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) 5-6. Or, as Jacques Derrida put the matter with exemplary concision, ‘The sign is always a sign of the Fall.’ Jacques Derrida, *Of grammatology*. Trans. and preface Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976) 283.

enduring vision of 'inherent' or intrinsic value, but in the person of a dead man and in the body of a vanished society.' Crucially for Hill, Hobbes brings the question of intrinsic value into focus in the archetypal image of an heroically sacrificed male body; in thus basing his 'enduring vision' upon the artful superimposition of the bodies of Godolphin and Christ he reminds us that our only possible route back to the intrinsic in value lies through the symbolic mediation of images, metaphor and the double writing of allegory. Hill's abiding legacy from Hobbes, beyond any temperamental or political affinity to his philosophical conservatism, has its roots in this conflation of intrinsic value with the interior movement of the reflectively working mind, an inheritance made plain in the way that both the 'intrinsic' and 'originality' become synonymous in his critical writing with what he calls 'the active shaping of the reflective voice.'

An observation Hill once made about a singular quality of George Eliot's style suggests how this perceived reciprocity between intrinsic value and reflective shaping enabled him to chart a path beyond either the specific modalities of Hobbesian tragic elegy or that customary conception of value in which it doubles as a defence of established entitlement and social hierarchy. The success of *Middlemarch*, he suggests, 'may be described as Eliot's capacity to represent an actuality of reflection and endurance by an achieved style that, in its own reflective power and in its demands upon both author and reader's sustained powers of attention, shows itself the moral equivalent of those very qualities it describes. For the author of *Middlemarch*, intrinsic value is *not so much in things*, or even in qualities, as in a faculty: the faculty of sustained attention; attention conceived moreover as a redemptive power.'¹⁷ A very great deal of what is vital to Hill's own view of intrinsic value inheres in the notion here of Eliot's 'not so much'; if, as I want to argue, for Hill as much as Eliot,

¹⁷ Geoffrey Hill, "Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value," *Collected Critical Writings* p. 472.

intrinsic value consists in a quality of reflection which, as it were, *hovers* over language, such reflection is always at the mercy of what he elsewhere calls a 'kind of neutral, or indifferent, or disinterested force in the nature of language itself' that exceeds our conscious grasp while too easily enfolding us either within the repetitive rhythms of our own entrenched mental habits or the dead perception of established opinion.¹⁸ Reflection in the Hillian sense therefore leads us inescapably into confrontation with a language that is both ours and other than our own. As he puts the matter, 'My language is in me and is me; even as I, inescapably, am a minuscule part of the general semantics of the nation; and as the nature of the State has involved itself in the nature that is most intimately mine. The nature that is most intimately mine may by some be taken to represent my intrinsic value. If it is so understood, it follows that intrinsic value, thus defined, bears the extrinsic at its heart.'¹⁹ This reciprocal and co-constituting relationship between the intrinsic and extrinsic offers one reason why elegy, which insistently recalls us to the moral and historical compacts at work in language even in the moment of their aesthetic transformation, has always been one of Hill's privileged modes. To put this another way, elegy ineluctably foregrounds a tension central to Hill's thought about value between *techne*, here understood as a quality or form of already given perception, and what he calls the 'technical' or that aesthetic moment of achieved style which holds the intrinsic and extrinsic in mutual, if sometimes rebarbative, relation. 'In part,' he somewhat disingenuously concludes, 'what we are attempting to define as "intrinsic value" is a form of technical integrity that is itself a form of common honesty.'²⁰ In part, indeed; but the amplifying extent of Hill's notion of the technical only becomes clear several sentences later when he observes that another way of stating the claim

¹⁸ Geoffrey Hill, "Poetry and Value," *Collected Critical Writings* p. 488.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Hill, "Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value," p. 477.

²⁰ Geoffrey Hill, "Poetry and Value," p. 481.

'is to say that the ethical and the technical are reciprocating forces and that the dimension in which this reciprocation must be demonstrated is the contextual.'²¹ To locate the ethical-technical in the contextual is, in Hill's terms at least, potentially to translate *ethos* into *activity* by gleaning what may be intrinsic to value in the shaping of active reflection from within the common medium of language.

I want now to consider what connections may be traced between Hill's reflections on intrinsic value and aspects of his own poetry. Let me do so by turning to one of his more celebrated early poems 'September Song,' his 1960s elegy for a nameless victim of the Nazi death camps:

Born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
you were not. Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.

Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made
an elegy for myself it

²¹ Ibid, p. 482.

is true)

September fattens on vines. Roses
flake from the wall. The smoke
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough²².

One of the many things which haunts me about this poem is its melancholy fascination with the fate of value when the reflective power both at work within, and made possible by, language, is turned over to already determined ends. Signs of this collapse are everywhere apparent in the first two stanzas which coolly constrict the technic of language into a barbarian political technology which reproduces and extends its power in the act of transforming particular kinds of human subjects into despised and alien objects. This technology conceals itself in the bloodless tone of bureaucratic rationalisation ('proper time,' 'As estimated,' 'sufficient,' 'just so much,' 'so many') which ceaselessly seeks to efface the humanity of individuals whose 'touchy' ethnic particularity is simultaneously fetishized and despised (a structural ambivalence marvellously captured by the play between 'undesirable' and 'untouchable' and the echo of 'Passover' in 'passed over').²³ At the same time my attention is held by Hill's poetic parenthesis which situates itself simultaneously inside and outside the 'world' of the poem, bringing an extrinsic pressure to bear upon its own intrinsic business. Crucially for my purposes, this force of the extrinsic takes the form of a *confession* -

²² Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p.44.

²³ Every reader of this poem is necessarily indebted to Jon Silkin's exemplary analysis in *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey*, Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop (eds), (Oxford: Carcanet, 1972): pp 145-47.

–‘I have made an elegy for *myself*, it is true, this lyric is both an ethical act of witness to a genocidal crime *and* a supreme enactment of my own poetic talent, which feeds upon material like this and finds its consummate expression in an achieved eloquence of mourning’ – which acknowledges within Hill’s work of elegiac consecration that inevitable tendency to the aestheticisation of memory which risks sacrificing the singularity of suffering to the false generality of the testamentary gaze. One way to resist this temptation and preserve what is ethically intrinsic to witness, ‘September Song’ suggests, is, as Hill puts the matter elsewhere, to inscribe the conditions of poetic judgement *within its judgement*, alienating it in the process from its claims to merely objective or historical existence by folding it back within the establishing terms of Hill’s own artistic response.²⁴

Up to this point I have been suggesting that Hill’s troubling of elegy tries to refine and expand our sense of the historical sense by returning us to the force of the extrinsic in the structure of language which recovers the intrinsic in value by leading it out beyond itself into the active work of reflection. To say this is to oppose, or at least partially contest, one prevailing critical view of Hill’s work which sees it as too much enthralled by the very elegiac energies it would master and compromised in its response to its own contemporary world by its anachronistic obsession with the past.²⁵ A glance at some of the terrain I have already touched upon – Ruskin, Hobbes, George Eliot, King Offa and the Holocaust – provides a clue why Hill is so often read as a relentlessly *nostalgic* poet, a writer whose imaginative tastes and predispositions leave him out of step with, and often seemingly

²⁴ Geoffrey Hill, “A Postscript on Modernist Poetics,” *Collected Critical Writings* p. 580.

²⁵ Hugh Haughton’s remark that there is something “obstinately archaic about Hill’s poetry” offers one notable instance of this critical view. See his “How Fit a Title . . . ? Title and Authority in the Work of Geoffrey Hill” in Peter Robinson, (ed) *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work* (Milton Keynes: Open University, 1985) p. 129.

actively hostile to, the cultural mores and preoccupations of his own time. It may be useful, at this point, to reconsider Hill's relationship to the historical sense by revisiting a distinction he recently advanced between what he respectively calls an 'autocracy' and a 'democracy of the dead.'²⁶ He borrows the arresting phrase 'democracy of the dead' from G. K. Chesterton, who employs it to argue that democratic values necessarily exist in reciprocal relation with the traditional life of a culture. 'Tradition may be defined,' Chesterton remarked in *Orthodoxy*, 'as an extension of the franchise. Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.'²⁷ What principally draws Hill to Chesterton's thinking in this area is the way it seems to offer him a suggestive social and political analogue for T. S. Eliot's notion of 'tradition' in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' where the intrinsic value of an aesthetic or cultural artefact is not to be discovered within itself but in a reciprocal and mutually constituting relation between the old and new. This mutually constituting conception of intrinsic value as a continually modified relation between old and new, Hill insists, stands at a crucial ethical distance from another far narrower and violently reactionary movement in Eliot's thinking resembling an 'autocracy of the dead' within which the idea of the intrinsically valuable is based upon the reassertion of native culture in the name of a quasi-feudalist understanding of nationhood.²⁸

²⁶ Hill develops both this distinction and the terms of the ensuing discussion of Chesterton and T.S. Eliot in his hitherto unpublished lecture of 3 December, 2013 as Oxford Professor of Poetry "'Poetry and the Democracy of the Dead.'" See <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/professor-sir-geoffrey-hill-lectures>. Web. 10 October 2016.

²⁷ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; London: Bodley Head, 1909) p. 85.

²⁸ As Hill notes, Eliot's notion of Virginia as a version of the ideal city is predicated upon its presumed freedom from a racialized and technologized vision of modernity: "You are further away from New York;

Crucially for my purposes, Hill, in considering the implications of Chesterton's appeal to a 'democracy of the dead' for our own contemporary circumstances, finds it necessary significantly to expand the scope of one of its key establishing terms. Unlike a century ago, Hill unhappily contends, the 'arrogant oligarchy' working to attenuate the intrinsic value of reflection conserved within the historical sense is now neither small nor simply walking about; nowadays it resembles a terrible, possibly terminal, consolidation of that dystopian force William Morris once named an 'anarchical plutocracy,' apparent everywhere around us in the ongoing corruption of public speech and democratic culture by the obscene hegemony of global high-finance, the levelling effects of a philistine media, and the circumscription of social values by the cash nexus.²⁹ One place in Hill's poetry where his apparently untimely and quasi-elegaic preoccupation with the intrinsically valuable comes into tense and revealing relationship with his own contemporary world is in the pages of his 2000 volume *Speech! Speech!* What I want briefly to do in conclusion is explore one or two aspects of this relationship in order to suggest what may be of more or less value in Hill's understanding of intrinsic value as it presents itself in his acerbic poetic portrait of 'the general semantics of the nation' at the close of the twentieth century.

Across the 120 stanzas of *Speech! Speech!*, one seemingly composed for each of the 120 days of Sodom, the threat posed by the overlapping forces of 'plutocratic anarchy' to our capacity to preserve that reflective grasp of language which reciprocally makes possible our ethical

you have been less industrialised and less invaded by foreign races; and you have a more opulent soil." See Eliot's *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, (London: Faber, 1934) p. 16.

²⁹ Hill revealingly elucidates his preoccupation with the notion of "plutocratic anarchy" in his essay "Civil Polity and the Confessing State," *Warwick Review* 2/2 (2008) p. 9. Hill's recent writing fluctuates between the rhetorical employment of "plutocratic anarchy" and "anarchical plutocracy"; although he long believed that the latter is his own ascription, the phrase is, as Helen Small reminds us, in fact an unconscious echo of William Morris's earlier coining. See Small, Helen, *The Value of the Humanities*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 62. Hill more recently reflected at some length upon the historical origins and ambit of the term in "Poetry and the Democracy of the Dead."

self-possession and our sense of mutual obligation comes directly centre stage. Stanza 1 offers a synoptic glimpse of the state of our modern degradation:

Erudition. Pain. Light. Imagine it great
 unavoidable work; although: heroic
 verse a non-starter, says PEOPLE. Some believe
 we over-employ our gifts. Given identical
 street parties, confusion, rapid exposure,
 practice self-emulation: music for crossed
 hands; for two fingers; music
 for taxiing to take-off; for cremation.
 Archaic means files pillaged and erased
 in one generation. Judge the distance.
 Innocent bystanders on stand by. Painful
 scenes mar final auto-da-fe (p. 1).³⁰

A cluster of themes are elliptically introduced here which recur throughout the entire sequence. There is, to begin with, Hill's unhappy conviction that contemporary social life now takes the form of an inclusive exclusion in which the familiar rhetoric of common citizenship and participatory democracy masks our real exclusion from the central nodes of political power. This bleak perception glimmers within the line 'Innocent bystanders on standby' where our experience of democratic citizenship has been reduced to the role of an 'innocent bystander,' our place in the collective process of civic self-formation relegated to the nominally included, but always potentially expendable, position of an airline passenger left hoping for a seat. Throughout the sequence Hill amplifies this sense of inclusive exclusion by ironically reconfiguring the modalities of public speech according to the market

³⁰ All references to *Speech! Speech!* (London: Penguin, 2000) are interpolated into main text.

imperatives and pre-patterned responses of formulaic media entertainment: here, Hill darkly suggests, at this point in modern Western culture, a 'credo' is indistinguishable from the repetitive babble of a 'car radio,' the deliberative time of democratic life scripted in advance by *Time-Life* and sold back to us in the form of advertising copy. 'Our show host has died many times,' Hill maintains, icily juxtaposing the endless succession of manufactured chat-show "personalities" with the singular incarnation of the one risen Christ, 'the words of welcome dismiss us' (p. 2). The opening to the sequence also affords a premonitory glimpse of a second major theme, namely Hill's abiding impression of the waning of the historical sense in British culture, a development he insistently links to the colonisation of the interior space of refection by the foreshortened time-spans and 'FAST RELIEF' of information technology (p. 13). In this brave new world of electronic simultaneity, 'archaic' is now synonymous with 'files pillaged and erased / in one generation'; with the erosion of longer spans of cultural memory and reflection, Hill mournfully observes, we now need '[F]ootnotes / to explain BIRKENAU' (p. 48). Surrounding this passage, meanwhile, is the question with which the entire sequence begins, namely what might yet redeem thought and reflection from its contemporary degradation by retrieving some sense of the intrinsic in value at a time when, in Hill's acerbic vision, the 'PEOPLE' has presumptively renounced any investment in the 'heroic' culture-renovating ambitions of Milton or Dante, two of the poem's presiding presences?

One possible answer to this question appears in the following stanza:

How is it tuned, how can it be un-
 tuned, with lithium, this harp of nerves? Fare well
 my daimon, inconstant
 measures, mood- and mind-stress, heart's rhythm
 suspensive; earth-stalled | the wings of suspension.

To persist without sureties | take
 any accommodation. What if Scattergood
 Commodity took all? Very well | you
 shall have on demand, by return, *presto*,
 my contractual retraction.
 Laser it off the barcode or simply
 cut here - (p. 2).

Should 'Scattergood Commodity take all,' Hill reflects, artfully refracting Ruskin through the allegorizing lens of John Bunyan, we must 'persist without sureties, take / any accommodation' (his ironic wordplay coolly reversing in the process the coercive circumscription of 'accommodation' by 'commodity') by fashioning a mode of public speech at variance with the market mechanism and the culture industry ('Laser it off the barcode or simply / cut here'), thereby opening the idea of culture to the estranging possibility of an as yet unimagined future. Yet Hill is all too aware that this transitive reworking of the intrinsic in value which sees the artwork as aesthetically autonomous and radically functionless in its opposition to the power of commodity conversion also elegiacally restates defining tendencies of modernist aesthetics (which is why his "retraction" is also a "contractual retraction," always upon the point of recuperation by the forces it would exceed). By cleaving so closely to this earlier aesthetic matrix Hill risks once more housing himself within the intransitive, and, in so doing, attenuating the power of active reflection to reconceive the relation between poet and people in the name of the future to come. At key moments in the sequence, Hill's agonised awareness of the potential division between the 'we' of public and the 'I' of poetic speech recurs as an unallayed anxiety about the intrinsic value of his relation to his own benighted community:

I cannot
do more now than gape or grin
haplessly. On self-advisement I erased
WE, though I is a shade too painful, even
among these figures tying confession
to parody (*laughter*). (p. 3).

Hill response to this threatened collapse back into the intransitive is relentlessly to stage the paradox of his position by simultaneously reinforcing and disrupting those elements of his writing which enact their own foreclosure. One way he does this is explicitly to tie “confession” to “parody” by saturating these stanzas in trailing echoes and half-remembered phrases from his earlier work, ironically reproducing the tendency in his own style to block its own potential for active reflection by lapsing back into its own established rhythmical and rhetorical predilections (a Hillian “high style,” as it were), while at the same time resituating these poems within a constantly expanding network of allusions which prevents them from circumscribing and delimiting their own imaginative ground.³¹ At its most extreme pitch, this tendency in Hill’s writing ‘insists on the condition of shabbiness as

³¹ To give but one example of this recurrent aspect of the poem, the lines from stanza 58:

“Better than that I should hope: my / word is my bond, my surety, my entail
Twelve press –ups at a time: such heaviness
Increased like due allowance. *Entre-nous*
The mad are predators. Forgive me.”

deftly interweave at least two self-conscious references to Hill’s own work, his essay ‘Our Word is our Bond,’ and a direct quotation from Hymn VIII of *Mercian Hymns* ‘The mad are predators.’ Hill’s excessive literary ‘entail,’ in this regard, simultaneously establishes and destabilises any ‘surety’ we might hope to find in his all-too-bonded words.

an essential part of the vision of redemption' by locating a redemptive faculty in the 'dysfunction' (or exorbitance) of language itself as it appears to us within the clamorous conditions of the mediatic 'public' sphere³²:

Look on the bright side – WHADDYA – WHADDYA –

Call this - script or prescription? Cite your own

Stiff going-price. Dysfunctional THIS

ALSO IS THOU. NEITHER IS THIS THOU.

Act through a few poor mime faces: pose late

Reflexion. As not unreflecting try

Posterity. Become vindictive in self-

Vindication? Fall then victor among

the secondary infections (p. 54).

This stanza reveals, to me at least, both the inner workings and possible weaknesses of Hill's view of the value of the relation between public and poetic speech. Confronted here by an audience either uncomprehending of, or unbelieving in, the power of the poetic imagination to redeem us from what he elsewhere calls 'a turmoil of public speech and media noise, a crowded wilderness of acoustical din' ('whaddya whaddya call this' is Hill's somewhat jaundiced version of the critical reaction to his recent poetic meditations on civil and civic power), the proper artistic response does not, he acknowledges, lie in 'prescription' or falling back upon already consecrated notions of aesthetic authority (to 'cite your own stiff-

³² The reference is to Hill's description of T.S.Eliot's imperfectly realised ambition in *Little Gidding*. See "A Postscript on Modernist Poetics," *Collected Critical Writings* p. 578.

going price' in a culture increasingly indifferent to poetic speech might merely mark you out as a 'stiff').³³ Neither is it to dream of a style of 'script' unmediated by the complex relationship between the speakable and unspeakable, the less and the more speakable, which shape both the history of a language and the potential sources of ethical redemption sedimented within it. Instead Hill's lines locate their redemptive ambitions in a pose of "late reflexion" which, reducing to a bare minimum the distance between the immediate and mediate in language, seeks to recover the discordant, sometimes antithetical, historical energies compacted in a word or phrase (becoming thereby "victor," not victim, of the secondary infections of language) so that we might reconceive the relationship between political and other forms of value.

Yet while acknowledging both the intellectual rigour of Hill's reflection upon intrinsic value and its imaginative centrality to his own poetic practice, I want briefly to conclude by noting one or two of its aspects which, in my view, compromise the eloquent authority of his own late style. Let me begin by returning to a significant observation made by Peter McDonald, one of Hill's most accomplished critics, in seeking to recover a proper sense of the scope of his achievement from critical contumely or neglect. A key reason for Hill's relative marginalisation within modern critical scholarship, McDonald suggests, is the problem posed by his work to styles of reading which repose authority in the consolatory notion of poetic 'personality.' Against such readings, which habitually turn, in their consideration of poetic effects, to habits of mind and culture extrinsic to the formal qualities of language, Hill's way of approaching poetry stubbornly 'puts poetic form in the place that 'personality' in fact tends to occupy' by working 'against the grain of opinion, or in complex and guarded relation to it, so as to create an original order in which language overpowers' the coercive

³³ See "Geoffrey Hill," in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their Own Words*, Clare Brown and Don Paterson (eds), (London: Picador, 2003) p. 116.

consensus of established judgement and opinion 'through an individual and (essentially unrepeatable) form.'³⁴ Much of Hill's distinction as a genuinely 'serious' poet in McDonald's sense of the term lies in his principled refusal of the spurious authority of poetic personality or any extrinsic resolution willed upon the poem 'which is not work done in and by the poem' and his cultivation instead of another kind of poetry which 'accepts form as its *sine qua non*, and puts up with the finally uncontrollable difficulty and complexity of language' because 'it knows words, not 'personality', are what survive or perish.'³⁵

Such terms, McDonald reminds us, echo Hill's own evaluative privileging of 'pitch' over 'tone' in poetic language where the former alludes to a quality of 'verbal exactingness' or 'deliberated awareness in the use of a word or phrase, in which even the intended meaning has taken stock of the misconstructions to which it is liable' whenever it is pressed into service by political rhetoric, the consolidated weight of public opinion, or the petrifying pressure of linguistic cliché, while the latter concerns 'the degree of collusion between writer and audience, where words and phrases are employed to mark and confirm the degree of that practical and mutually accepted relationship.'³⁶ Hill's corollary belief that such tonal 'collusion,' in sacrificing the intrinsically transformative capacity of language to 'mediate within itself' to an extrinsic and already given sense of the real, places words at the service of prevailing, possibly authoritarian, power also underpins his ethico-political defence of the notorious 'difficulty' of his own writing.³⁷ Whereas tyranny, he points out, is fostered and reinforced by the 'gross simplification of language,' genuinely 'difficult' art is

³⁴ Peter McDonald, *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007) 5.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 8, 14,

³⁶ *Ibid*, 205.

³⁷ Geoffrey Hill, 'The Eloquence of Sober Truth,' *Collected Critical Writings* 341.

‘truly democratic’ insofar as it returns responsible judgement into our own individual keeping.³⁸ Similarly renouncing both the ‘unattainable authority of the authentic self’ and the seductions of poetic personality, the most enduringly valuable poetry, Hill declares, retains an insistently ‘double quality’ of ‘self-knowledge and self-criticism’ in which ‘the language seems able to hover above itself in a kind of brooding, contemplative, self-rectifying way.’³⁹

Against this background let us consider poem LXVII from *The Triumph of Love*:

By what right did Keyes, or my cousin’s
 Lancaster, or the trapped below-decks watch
 of Peter’s clangorous old destroyer-escort,
 serve to enfranchise these strange children
 pitiless in their ignorance and contempt?
 I know places where grief has stood mute –
 howling for half a century, self
 grafted to unself till it is something like
 these now-familiar alien hatreds,
 coarse efflorescence over the dead
 proprieties; strong words of Christian hope,
sub rosa, the unmentionable graffiti.

What interests me about this passage is the intrusion of a metanarrative voice which floats free of the poem’s internal play of perception to align Hills writing with an all-too-recognisable, and recognisably conservative, view of English social modernity. Insofar as the poem’s power of elegiac and ethical reflection derives in the first instance from the

³⁸ Carl Phillips, ‘Geoffrey Hill, The Art of Poetry, Number 80’ *The Paris Review*, 154, 2000: 277.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 283.

reflexive play on 'right,' this power is abruptly dissipated by the rhetorical conversion of historical memory into reactionary cultural cliché ('serve to enfranchise these strange children / pitiless in their ignorance and contempt'). If Hill makes little effort to refine or develop this desolating image of myriad 'ignorant' and 'contemptuous' children disfiguring post-war English life it is because it is imported fully formed into the poem from a half century of tabloid headlines: here stand gazing back at us the 'youth of today.' This fateful lurch from pitch into tone which, far from cultivating the interior qualities of its own formal and expressive resources or demonstrating 'that poetry cannot work to extra-poetic agendas,' merely ventriloquises the reactionary nostalgia of conservative elites, is reinforced in both *Triumph* and *Speech!* by a despairing vision of English social modernity which stands behind and apart from, even as it is refashioned by, the intrinsic workings of Hill's poetic economy.⁴⁰

Throughout Hill's late work post-1945 English life is distinguished both by its ethical distance from the heroic example of the wartime generation and the unaccountable – because stubbornly unreckoned in his own poetic accounting – loss of some vital power of language and reflective intelligence which severs us from the living force of our cultural patrimony. 'Nor is language, now, what it was / even in – wait a tick – nineteen hundred

⁴⁰ Peter McDonald, *Serious Poetry* 15. It is noteworthy, to take one recurring aspect of Hill's engagement with contemporary social modernity in *Speech!*, that his dismissively monocular sense of social technology and mediatic culture (which frequently limits their effect upon modern life to the narcissistic and self-gratifying pleasure of 'fast relief') takes little countenance of how the speed and ubiquity of tele-technology potentially prefigures new forms of collective solidarity and new conditions of common life which cannot be reduced to presumptive coercion or the conditions of factional consensus. Electronic media, in other words, doesn't merely constitute a world of manufactured consent; the media extension of the technotronic sphere into the emerging public realm of virtual online communities also potentially makes it possible to resist, as well as reinforce, the levelling power of 'scattergood commodity.'

and forty - /five of the common era,' Hill observes in one of his recurring addresses to the *Vergine bella*:

when your blast-scarred face
appeared staring, seemingly in disbelief,
shocked beyond recollection, unable to recognize
the mighty and the tender salutations
that slowly, with innumerable false starts, the ages
had out together for your glory,
in words and in the harmonies of stone.

That Hill, the vagueness of his temporising ('wait a tick') and the slipperiness of his phrasing ('what it once was') notwithstanding, intends this as a serious claim about our modern lack of these vital capacities is confirmed in a crucial late stanza of *Triumph* which juxtaposes the gradual undoing of the noble vernacular of Erasmus and More ('Memory / and attention died, *comme ça*, which is not reasonable') with the image of 'D-Day men / drowned by the gross, in surf-dreck, still harnessed / to their lethal impedimenta.' Following the 'death' of memory and attention, and the forms of reflective integration they make possible, however, it appears that to Hill we are all now 'drowned by the gross,' mired in indistinction, left helplessly to ponder 'the unfairness / and waste of survival; a nation / with so many memorials but no memory.'

Quite apart from the not inconsiderable matter of what it might mean to claim that a nation has 'no memory,' we see revealed here once again the baleful decline of pitch into tone. None of the 'work' performed by writing like this is done in or by the poem; instead the labour of intrinsic mediation is supplanted by a style of dogmatic assertion which arrives fully formed from outside and is happily collusive with the self-approving contempt for

contemporary modes of common life that constitutes the staple diet of right-wing establishment opinion. The disquieting sense that Hill smuggles into his writing through the back door here an intransitive element in value intensifies when we consider what in his work might act as compensation for the progressive, now apparently total, waning of the historical sense in late-twentieth century England. As Peter McDonald reminds us, Hill has repeatedly suggested that 'the loss of memory and the loss of attention are aspects of a more general change in temper' within English culture; Hill's evasiveness concerning the specific temporal origin of this dissociation of historical sensibility notwithstanding, it appears to have intensified for him at the start of the last century with the privileging of 'accessibility' and 'intelligibility' of address over scrupulous regard for the proper pitch of language.⁴¹ Hill's reflections upon the ethical resourcefulness of genuinely 'difficult' art in fostering forms of sceptical intelligence which, working in 'qualifications and revelations,' discover within themselves powers of resistance to 'tyrannical simplification' and the coercive consensus of established opinion are often brilliant and brilliantly persuasive; what remains notable, all the same, is the extent to which Hill elides loss of historical memory with the loss of a particular English spiritual tradition.

As his wry observation 'As not unreflecting try / posterity' tacitly concedes, his continual labour to recover to memory the exacting ethical legacy of certain key spiritual precursors ('your proud ignorance of doctrine, contempt / for the protracted, indeterminate, / passion-through-history of the English church, / the church of Wesley, Newman, and George Bell') always risks constituting a "democracy of the dead" in the wrong sense by constraining the restless force of our daily struggle with words and meanings within an already established (or 'unreflecting') horizon of value. The persistence of this intransitive element within Hill's

⁴¹ Ibid, 214, See also Geoffrey Hill, 'Of Diligence and Jeopardy,' *Collected Critical Writing* 293.

reflection on what he elsewhere calls ‘the perplexed matter of tradition, or custom, as we have received it’ is, in a certain sense, to be expected given his professed belief in the “terrible Aboriginal calamity” of Original Sin. If Hill’s insistence upon our radically fallen nature sometimes impels him into a tersely declarative mode (‘We were made / to make ourselves instruments / of violence and cunning’), the idea of fallenness threatens at certain moments to assume the very place of the intrinsic; by this I mean that the potential for individual self-actualisation inseparable from what Hill calls ‘democracy’ sometimes approximates more nearly to a Miltonic notion of “right reason” in which our capacity to extend the range of our intellective and sensuous powers is most fully realised in reflecting the intransitive intrinscality of our inner spiritual nature.⁴²

It is perhaps worth recalling at this point that Hill has sometimes signalled his awareness of a certain tendency towards the intransitive in his own thinking about ‘democracy.’ Consider the following line from *Speech!*

The state is held
to the character of its citizens. Surrogate
is what I am. They can have my views
on all such matters: the fabrication
of natural light, the poison-runnels
greening with slick. If not hierarchy
then general dynamics.

If not hierarchy then general dynamics: In hearing this sentence I am reminded of the places in Hill’s writing where the general and quotidian are elided with a ‘confused mass of

⁴² Geoffrey Hill. “Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value,” *Collected Critical Writing* 475.

thoughts' amid which 'the creative judgement must labour to choose or reject.'⁴³ Yet to the extent that 'hierarchy' can be considered synonymous with the intrinsic work of discrimination by which the reflective intelligence separates the transitive from the intransitive characteristics of language, it cannot easily detach itself from the determining force of those other, already established and deeply conservative, hierarchies of social power and prestige which help arbitrate ideas of cultural value and whose ideological representations and rationalisations impress themselves upon the rhetorical terms of Hill's own writing. In response to such entrenched hierarchies, scrupulous attention to the intransitive forces at work in and on the medium of language must calibrate, rather than reflexively reproduce, the extra-linguistic pressures which shape and delimit what Hill identifies 'at the most basic level' as 'the question of polity,' namely 'that of entitlement to speak, one's right to claim authority.'⁴⁴ Or, as he phrases the matter in *Speech!*, 'Scrupulosity can kill, like inattention.' Considerations like these offer potential extrinsic points of resistance to particular aspects of Hill's thinking of intrinsic value, opening it up to alternative readings which might prevent its slippage into what Hill dismissively calls the 'easy flow of self-serving parlance' by reposing too securely upon its own established terms.⁴⁵

Work Cited

⁴³ Geoffrey Hill, "Dryden's Prize Song," *Collected Critical Writing* 228. A perception bolstered by the play here on 'dynamism' in "dynamics' which mimics what Hill sees as the spontaneous and unreflective conversion of feeling into mass sentiment in modern mediatic culture: "I disclaim spontaneity, / the appearance of which is power.'

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Hill, "The Eloquence of Sober Truth," *Collected Critical Writing* 348.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 481.

Clare Brown and Don Paterson (eds). *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their Own Words*. London: Picador, 2003.

Jacques Derrida. *Of grammatology*. Trans. and preface Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976.

Gilbert K Chesterton. *Orthodoxy*. London: Bodley Head, 1909.

T. S. Eliot. *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*. London: Faber & Faber, 1934.

Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen,

Jean E, Howard & Katherine Eisman Maus. *The Norton Shakespeare*. London: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Kevin Hart. *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.

Geoffrey Hill. *Collected Critical Writings*. Ed. Kenneth Haynes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

- - - . *The Triumph Of Love*. London: Penguin 1998.

- - - . *Speech! Speech!* London: Penguin, 2000.

-- . *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*. Ed. Kenneth Haynes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

- - - . "Civil Polity and the Confessing State." *Warwick Review*. 2/2. (June 2008). 7-20.

- - - . "Poetry and the 'Democracy of the Dead.'" <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/professor-sir-geoffrey-hill-lectures>.

Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan*. Ed. C. B. Macpherson. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984.

John Lyon & Peter MacDonald (eds). *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Later Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Peter MacDonald, *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Years to Hill*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.

James James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ed. Jeri Johnson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Philip Pettit. *Made with Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind and Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Peter Robinson (ed). *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*. Milton Keynes: Open University, 1985.

John Ruskin. *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain Vol 4*. 1871; London, George Allen, 1906.

Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop (eds). *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey*. Oxford: Carcanet, 1972.

Helen Small. *The Value of the Humanities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.